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Duxbury's Early Shopping Centers

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My father had a complaint. He told my mother that he invariably met one of my brothers or sisters (there were nine of us) either coming or going to the First National Store as he rounded the Cable Office Corner coming home at the end of his daily meat peddling route. I think this was probably true as my harassed mother would rush to prepare another meal for at least a dozen hungry people, and last minute shortages were a constant factor. We did have a built-in resource in our meat market in the basement of our house, but we couldn't flourish on an all-meat diet.

I begin this report with this general fact because this was the pattern of shopping with which I grew up in Duxbury. There were no zoning laws, so people set up what are now called "Mom and Pop" stores selling various items. The Belknaps, for example, had a harness shop in North Duxbury; the Petersons, a grocery and variety store near the corner of Surplus St. and Washington; and many others topped by the greatest "General Store" of all, Ford's store above the Millbrook on what is now Tremont Street. Artifacts from this omnibus emporium are visible today at the King Caesar House Museum maintained by the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society on Powder Point. A frequent practice was to include saleable items along with a local post office so the government subsidy could help defray expenses. Such a store stood for many years across from Winslow's blacksmith shop next to the Methodist church on High Street. Again, there was the Millbrook Post Office Store, run by a

Mrs. Lizzie Johnson, catering to customers who took the train back and forth to Boston. Waldo Loring had a similar store near the Island Creek railroad station that also served as the Island Creek post office. Stores flourished wherever people passed in numbers or congregated for some community activity, and usually within walking distance of residences.

Commercially speaking, this was the "Peddlers' Era", when the grocer, the meat man, the vegetable man, the scissors grinder, the laundry man, the ice man, and milkman all came around on signal to houses where people live. The signal was a card placed in a given window spot to let the particular peddler know that a need existed for his product. Housewives who were usually at home had a selection of cards which had to be placed properly to receive the required attention that day.

This did not, however, preclude the birth and growth of concentrations of business establishments. Such concentrations centered roughly in areas in Duxbury. One was Hall's Corner, where Barnes had set up a market with the surprising expectation that people would come to his shop instead of waiting for a peddler. Since his roster of goods included meat, this new beginning was viewed with some disfavor by my father who still felt people would prefer to remain at home and be served by a semi-weekly visiting peddler. This commercial corner was probably a lineal descendant of the initial gathering place called "Morton's Hole" which rivaled Kingston's "Wading Place" at the estuary of the Jones River in popularity. This



The Charles Drew Jr. House, built in 1826, was a grocery store. The Drew House is now owned by DR&HS.

was indeed a popular spot for many years, being the location of the first two meeting houses, one built in 1632 and the other a century later. A second business area, and probably the most extensive, was what is now known as "Snug Harbor." A row of stores lined the street from Colonial Inn (now the Leonards' residence) all the way to "Clapp's Hill," ending with a smoky blacksmith shop. The first store next to the inn was Sweetser's, still serving today as then an impressive roster of customers. Sweetser's combined the services of peddler and selling on the premises. It was their custom to receive orders in the morning and deliver in the afternoon. It was primarily a grocery store, but I can recall buying cloth goods and spools of thread there. Next to Sweetser's was perhaps the keenest rival to Ford's store for the place of the most prestigious

business establishment in town, the Duxbury Coal & Lumber Company. It was here that schooners in full sail loaded with these necessities of life came in from the "outside," such as lumber from Maine and coal from Sydney, Nova Scotia. Charles Brueby, who lived next to Morrison Chandler's boarding house at the corner of Washington and Harrison Sts., ran the company for many years. The Duxbury Coal & Lumber docks were also preempted by the town on occasion, for the town at that time had no dock of its own. The Duxbury Yacht Club was then, as now, a flourishing sailing club, and there were only a few fishing boats in the basin. Beyond Duxbury Coal & Lumber Company stood Josselyn's variety store, presided over by a saint of a man who had in-

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jured a leg as a young man and got about only with difficulty. His store was a collector's dream with knick-knacks of all kinds, mementos, antiques, and many kinds of confection to tickle the palate. He was closed on Sundays, but had a sort of bubble-gum machine dispenser outside his entrance, which was a real attraction to us on Sunday mornings on the way to Sunday school in the Congregational church at the top of the hill. (The Episcopal church, which sits in back, was closed except for the summers.) The story is told of a youngster who was given a nickel in each fist with the instruction that one was for God in the collection plate and the other was for a ball of gum. He became so engrossed in manipulating the machine that one nickel dropped onto the step, bounced into the gutter, and disappeared down the grating. Heaving a sigh, he was heard to say, "So sorry God, that was your nickel."

The shopping area that I knew best was down the hill from our house and across the Blue Fish River Bridge. It is now a quiet, peaceful spot where not much happens to disturb its tranquility. It is hard to imagine the bustling commercial scene that occurred here in my boyhood. I could never understand why it flourished so, in looking back these 60 or so years. My suspicion is that this was simply the carry-over from the great shipbuilding days of Duxbury in the early and mid-1800s. Much business was concentrated here then, with many comings and goings, and the stores and other enterprises I knew by the simple

inertia of human behavior just kept on going here. Beyond these stables stood the grocery store our family patronized; the First National it was called. The flagpole stood as it now stands with an enormous square-rigger weather vane at the top and a stone horse watering trough at its base. This watering trough, given by the then "Rural Society," now sits on the edge of the parklet beside the river. Continuing south, Stranger had his plumbing shop, and Tony Lucas had his barber shop just above the stone wall by the river. Tony charged 25 cents for a haircut and 15 cents for a shave and sold various condiments as well. I remember my favorite was a "Waleco coconut bar," which cost 5 cents. It is not generally known, but it is interesting as I discovered the other day as I was prowling around, to find the source of the Blue Fish River, that Donald Hollis, Tony Lucas's grandson, owned one end of the river off Pilgrim-By-Way and Tony controlled the other.

At the top of the hill above the river stood Paul Peterson's drug store and across from it the post office with the telephone exchange upstairs. The Masonic Hall and the Unitarian Parish House were beyond on the same side, and the GAR Hall where many social and patriotic events were celebrated was two buildings beyond. This and the rest of Washington St. past Snug Harbor was called the Village, and we who lived here felt we were where the action was, in contrast to the deprived citizens from the rest of town. There was a great deal of neighborhood loyalty, and I'm always glad to see this continuing in our Fourth of July parades where Tinkertown,



The Village Store owned by W.O. Peterson, Washington Street at corner of Bumblebee Lane. Now a private residence. Photo c. 1904.

Ashdod, and Island Creek, etc., have their own floats. But the scene is changing. The town used to be organized by its mail deliveries as well as its commercial exchanges on the basis of these tight neighborhoods.

My father believed the automobile was a fad that would come and pass away. He felt that live animals like horses that lived off the land and with proper care, reproduced their kind, was the natural way to go. Autos required elaborate roadways, enormous factories, and a network of supplies, commanding the entire countryside effort. But he *did* switch to autos when the time came for it. The greatest event in his life when he passed the age of 94 was to have his car license renewed for four years. I might add that his family did not reflect the same enthusiasm.

Indeed it does look as if the auto is

here to stay, at least until the fossil fuels run out, but the varied way people in all ages have developed the physical means to enable them to cope with the needs of their lives is a reassuring thing for us. Duxbury has a record of many attempts in as many ages of culture. Sweeping all the way from colonial times and even our archaeological discoveries back to the times of the Indians. A current effort by the Duxbury Historical Commission, headed by Jean Poindexter Colby, to have two showcase presentations of two distinct periods in our past at the Alden House and the King Caesar House. We now urgently need an effort to preserve the best of our present and immediate past as well. The recovery of our past is, as I have found, a most rewarding effort; for Duxbury is a veritable gold mine of history for perhaps a thousand years of our past.